

You sit in Julia's car, once again in traffic. Brian is not with you. You two are going to "an appetizer bar" to meet him and two of his friends from out of town.

JULIA: What is this place called again?

YOU: "Catholic Tastes"

JULIA: What's that all about?

YOU: I think "catholic tastes" means broad or universal.

JULIA: Okay, so they're going to have appetizers from all over the world?

YOU: I guess so.

JULIA: Huh.

Traffic is being its usual self. Then you get off the freeway and travel down some main streets, find the establishment, find parking, get out of the car and lock the doors, walk, and approach.

The building's sign stylizes the name as "catholic tastes". The sign is lit up in this early night-time.

You two enter.

The room is dim, but lit with a certain pale yellow warmth by tasteful fixtures. The room is on the small side, long, organized around the bar. The bar is covered in tile. There is a row of small tables in a line parallel to the bar. The

walls are covered in brickwork.

JULIA: What is that painting?

YOU: I think that's the Virgin of Guadalupe.

JULIA: And that stained glass looks like Jesus.

There's a stained glass piece lit up from a light on the wall, set behind the bar. It appears to be of Jesus turning water into wine.

JULIA: Huh, it looks like this place might be Catholic-themed.

YOU: Yeah.

A man walks out, behind the bar.

MAN: Hello, what can I get for you?

YOU: We're waiting to meet some friends here.

MAN: Alright, so anything to drink?

Something tells you to order water.

YOU: I'd like some water.

MAN: Mineral water?

YOU: Yes.

MAN: With ice?

YOU: Okay, sure.

MAN: How about you?

JULIA: I'll have the same.

You two sit down at the bar and soon the man returns with your drinks.

YOU (truthfully): This is a beautiful place.

MAN: Thank you.

YOU: Are you the owner?

He looked like an owner.

MAN: I'm the co-owner. The other owner is in the back getting the appetizers ready. I'm the bartender and he's the food guy.

JULIA: Is this place Catholic-themed?

MAN: We thought we would play around with that a little, yeah.

JULIA: Did that offend anyone?

MAN: When we first opened, we got a strongly-worded email from the diocese. But it's all good. These things happen. One of our best customers is a priest.

Julia makes a face that you detect but he doesn't.

You all make some small talk and then he disappears into the back to talk to the other owner.

JULIA: When are the other people coming?

You check your phone.

YOU: It looks like they're finding parking.

JULIA: Okay.

You look at the line of beers and wines behind the bar, and idly look through the beverage menu.

Julia looks down at the grout on the bar.

JULIA: This place is really tasteful.

YOU: Yeah, the painting is really good, the decor. Oh, it looks like Brian.

BRIAN: Hello.

His companions, a woman and a man about his age, sit down at the bar.

BRIAN: This is Andrew and his wife Felicity. Andrew was my roommate in college. This is Julia, and Beth.

YOU: Hi.

FELICITY: Hi.

ANDREW: Hello.

JULIA: Hi.

You make small talk and the other customers come in, filling the tables and the rest of the bar. Soon the restaurant is noisy, and you and Julia are isolated from Brian and his friends, as they are so concerned with catching up.

Bartender approaches with menus.

BARTENDER: I'll be back in a bit to take your orders.

You all study your menus.

The menu is broken into three different sections. There's the Feast-day menu, all meat-based. There's the Lenten menu, all fish-based. And the St. Francis menu, which is vegan. It looks like everything comes as a half-dumpling, made either with regular wheat, or gluten-free.

JULIA: There's one here called "St. Peter's Basilica" -- "basil, pepper, almonds, dried cranberries".

YOU: Yeah, they're all like that.

JULIA: This is a luxury place.

YOU: Each one is only two dollars.

JULIA: I bet they're not very big.

YOU: Well, can we afford it?

JULIA: Yeah, we can afford it. This isn't a big deal.

YOU: Yeah, I can afford it, too.

You see on the next page some non-appetizer items. They have "Monk's Bread" which apparently is plain, dry bread. "Brushed with oil and vinegar" says the menu. Also there are some sauces, including the provocatively-

named "Judas' Tears" which is "a salty quinine sauce, for those with truly *catholic tastes*".

Then you see at the bottom of the page the specials. Chief among them is "the Rosary". "All 59 of our appetizers, arranged on a platter, served with a crucifix."

You count to make sure, and sure enough, there are exactly 59 of the appetizers.

Andrew and Felicity are immediately taken with the idea of the Rosary.

ANDREW (to the bartender): Do you think the five of us would be able to finish a Rosary?

BARTENDER: Absolutely. It's the perfect size. Maybe order some Monk's Bread, too.

ANDREW: Okay. You guys want it?

It looks expensive but you don't say anything. You divide the price by five and it still seems like a lot. You still don't say anything.

ANDREW: My treat.

He's so confident in this offer that none of you think to refuse it. And the way he's dressed, and the way he talks, and the things you overheard from his conversation with Brian earlier make you think that for him, this is nothing, just a night out.

Andrew orders a St. Agnes Stout.

BARTENDER: Excellent choice.

ANDREW: That's brewed by monks, right?

BARTENDER: That's right.

Felicity orders a drink as well. Brian even orders a drink (one of their "Virgin Margaritas").

The bartender looks at your bill.

BARTENDER: You guys are in luck. You qualify for a tithe.

BRIAN: What's that?

BARTENDER: Ten percent of your bill goes to St. Therese's Kids, a Catholic charity for children with cancer.

ANDREW: How did we qualify?

BARTENDER: When your bill exceeds a certain amount, you earn the right to give...

ANDREW: Wow, I wish I had spent even more.

BARTENDER: There's always next time...

ANDREW: I'm from out of town.

BARTENDER: Well, you can always donate to St. Therese's Kids online.

ANDREW: Yeah, I guess that's true.

The night proceeds. Andrew, Felicity, and even Brian speak loudly, get into their reminiscences. Felicity and Andrew even have a friendly argument over whether they want to have kids.

You and Julia are in your own world, taking in everything you see and commenting on the people around you.

The platter arrives.

BARTENDER: I'm going to count them once so you don't have to.

He counts each appetizer confidently and convincingly. There are exactly 59 of them.

Then he goes back and comes back with a crucifix, placing it in a hollow spot in the crowd of appetizers.

BARTENDER: Enjoy.

You find yourself for some reason only interested in the vegan appetizers, which you can identify because the tops of the appetizers are missing, showing their contents. Julia follows suit, and eats less than you do. The others are impressed by what they eat, and enjoy what they have with all their hearts.

YOU: These are really good.

JULIA: Yeah. I agree.

Overall, this is turning into a good night,

surrounded by beauty. You and Julia relax.

YOU: Look at the Virgin painting. Doesn't she look sad?

JULIA: Yeah, but why should she be sad? She's so beautiful.

YOU: Sadness is beautiful.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Do you ever wish you could live inside a painting?

JULIA: Which painting?

YOU: Any painting. A painting you like.

JULIA: Yes. At least for a day or two.

The evening goes along and you talk about Robert, and Julia's dates, and also about your work. You and Julia are catching up. This bar is the right kind of place to catch up.

At some point, the bartender puts on some background music. It seems odd to you that there wasn't any earlier. It's an opera. You don't normally listen to opera, but somehow in the context of all the trust, and all the appetizers, and the mineral water which must have been turned into wine inside of you, the music is indescribably beautiful to you, and you look on the crucifix, now all that remains of the Rosary, with new eyes.

YOU: Julia, look at the crucifix. It's so beautiful.

JULIA: Yeah, there is something about it.

YOU: I can't say anything bad about this place.

JULIA: I can't either.

You two are caught up in the flow.

The three others talk and talk, and you and Julia fall silent, checking your phones. And then the bill comes and Andrew pays, for everything. You all leave, Brian now going with you two since the others are headed their own way.

ON THE WAY HOME

Traffic is only a little lighter this time of night. Brian sits in the passenger seat, and you sit in the back seat. Julia looks over her shoulder when she makes a lane change and taps her fingers on the steering wheel when she has to wait for the car in front of her to move forward.

BRIAN: I realize you two didn't get to hear much of what my friends were saying. So it's like you didn't really meet them.

YOU: We heard bits and pieces. You went to college with Andrew?

BRIAN: Yeah. At the University of Hoheres Wesen.

JULIA: What were you like in college?

BRIAN: I was normal.

JULIA: Like you're normal now?

BRIAN: Yeah. I've always been normal.

JULIA: You've never been weird?

BRIAN: No. I think other people think I'm weird.

JULIA: But they're wrong.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: How are you normal if everyone else is different from you?

BRIAN: I'm like the normal distribution. Most people aren't.

YOU: Like you're average?

BRIAN: I'm like averageness. Average people aren't like averageness.

YOU: Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about yourself?

BRIAN: No. Why would it?

YOU: Are you being egotistical when you talk about yourself?

BRIAN: No.

YOU: Okay. I believe you.

BRIAN: Yeah, I didn't do any clubs in college or anything. I just studied and read in the library.

And, yeah, I hung out in the apartment with Andrew.

JULIA: Did you have any other roommates?

BRIAN: Yeah, but nobody I kept in touch with. Just people we had for a year to fill out the lease.

JULIA: Would you describe Andrew as one of your best friends?

BRIAN: No.

JULIA: Was he at the time?

BRIAN: I think we were close just from spending so much time together, but I don't know if we were really friends. Or maybe we were friends, from spending so much time together, but we weren't really close.

YOU: What's he been up to these days?

BRIAN: Well, he got married to Felicity, for one. That was a couple of years ago. He works in a law firm, a lot of hours. They live on the East Coast now.

JULIA: New York?

BRIAN: Yeah. They live in New Jersey and he works in New York.

JULIA: What does she do for a living?

BRIAN: She's a hairdresser. She wants to have a baby and quit working and raise the baby full-time.

YOU: That would be great. She should totally do that.

JULIA: Beth, would you want to live that life?

YOU: I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I would.

BRIAN: Maybe you would make a good mom.

YOU: Yeah, maybe.

JULIA: Is that something you want?

YOU: Sometimes I think that it is, but then I don't.

JULIA: Maybe you shouldn't be a mom.

BRIAN: Maybe if she became a mom, she would be committed to her child so much that she would be a good mom even if she didn't feel like it that day.

JULIA: Yeah, maybe.

BRIAN: Change of subject: what was your favorite appetizer?

YOU: I didn't recognize any of them by name except for St. Peter's Basilica.

BRIAN: How was that?

YOU: It tasted like basil salad.

JULIA: That's pretty much what it was from the menu.

BRIAN: How about you, Julia, what was your favorite?

JULIA: I didn't have a favorite. They were all good.

BRIAN: My favorite was the Paschal Lamb. We tried to identify all of them, looking at a menu.

You continue to talk, in the same vein.

BRIAN: Catholic Tastes was pretty good. I'd go there again.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: Are we going to remember it though?

YOU: We'll probably forget about it.

BRIAN: It is a long ways away, in traffic.

JULIA: So we're not going to go there very often.

YOU: We might forget it if we don't go there very often.

BRIAN: But maybe it will come up and we'll go back there.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: I kind of want to make my own appetizers now.

YOU: You should.

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm totally going to do that when I get home.

JULIA: Maybe you will, maybe you won't.

BRIAN: I will. I'm an appetizer person now. I've been converted.

JULIA: You didn't like appetizers before?

BRIAN: Not really. I like my meals to be filling, for a good price.

YOU: Have you heard of Simple Life?

BRIAN: What's that?

YOU: It's a fast food chain.

BRIAN: I don't normally go to fast food places.

YOU: Their slogan is "Faster than fast food, and healthier, too."

BRIAN: How do they manage that?

YOU: They're mainly a rice and beans place. They constantly make rice and beans and just put them in containers when people drive up.

BRIAN: It's a drive through?

YOU: Yeah. And they have a small sit-down space. They also make greens and other vegetables.

BRIAN: No meat?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: How much do they cost?

YOU: Same price as fast food but bigger portions.

BRIAN: Do they have sauces?

YOU: Yeah, they make salsas and sauces.

BRIAN: And they make money?

YOU: They've been expanding.

BRIAN: Huh, I'll have to check that out.

YOU: Definitely.

BRIAN: It sounds filling.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Is the sit-down space like a fast food place?

YOU: Yeah, not very inviting.

BRIAN: You've been to one?

YOU: I went once, yeah.

BRIAN: How was the food?

YOU: I got black beans and brown rice. And, some kind of greens, probably collard.

BRIAN: How was it?

YOU: It was just like if you make black beans and rice at home, with collard greens. It's not like restaurant food at all.

BRIAN: Wow.

YOU: Yeah, it was pretty plain so I put some salsa on it and then it was good. Also vinegar on the collard greens.

BRIAN: We should go there sometime.

YOU: They don't have any locations near our part of town.

JULIA: Maybe we'll remember if we're ever out where they are.

BRIAN: A chain like that probably has a story behind it.

YOU: Yeah, probably. I don't know what the story is, though.

You all lapse into silence. Time passes.

BRIAN: Any plans for tomorrow?

YOU: Just working. I have a backlog.

BRIAN: How do you keep track of what it is you're supposed to do?

YOU: I put it on my calendar on the computer and that seems to work okay for me.

JULIA: I have to work at a restaurant.

BRIAN: Which one?

JULIA: It's way out in Dulce Verde. You don't want to go there.

BRIAN: No, I don't.

JULIA: I'll be working late. No fun.

BRIAN: No fun at all?

JULIA: Brian, have you ever worked an honest day in your life?

BRIAN: Not really.

JULIA: You don't understand. Factually, there are fun moments at my job, at any job. But the personal reality of the job is that there's no fun. No fun at all.

BRIAN: It's more accurate for you to say "no fun", even though there is fun.

JULIA: Right. There's a reality which you need to know about, and that is that this job is no fun.

BRIAN: So you probably want to go to bed.

JULIA: Yeah. But it was good to go out.

BRIAN: Yeah, Catholic Tastes was different.

JULIA: It felt like being in a Nativity Scene.

BRIAN: Because of the stained glass scene of Jesus?

JULIA: No, just the way the different things made the vibe.

BRIAN: You grew up Christian?

JULIA: No, my parents weren't really into it.

BRIAN: Did you ever think about it?

JULIA: I had a boyfriend in high school who took me to church. But that was enough for me.

BRIAN: Are you against Christianity?

JULIA: Are you against lies?

BRIAN: I try to be.

JULIA: At this point I don't try to be against Christianity. I heard something once that said that if you attack something, you make it bigger.

BRIAN: So you're attacking Christianity by ignoring it?

JULIA: Yeah.

BRIAN: So your action is to ignore it, but your heart is to attack it.

JULIA: No, my heart doesn't care.

BRIAN: No, but deeper, your heart is to attack it.

JULIA: Yeah, I guess so.

BRIAN: What don't you like about Christianity?

JULIA: It's a bunch of bad advice. Like the Sermon on the Mount.

BRIAN: I don't know that the Bible is true, but the Sermon on the Mount is beautiful.

JULIA: No, it just keeps people from getting the good things they can get.

BRIAN: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will see God."

JULIA: Yeah, out of wish fulfillment.

BRIAN: Wait, I got that wrong. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

JULIA: Yeah, same thing.

BRIAN: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

JULIA: Yeah, if somebody next to them does the comforting. In which case, duh. That's what people do for each other when they care about each other. You don't need Jesus to tell you that.

BRIAN: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

JULIA: That's a straight up lie.

BRIAN: There's the quote "The meek will inherit the earth, but the bold will inherit the stars."

JULIA: No, neither of them get anything. The earth is inherited by the power structure.

BRIAN: Maybe the power structure is meek.

JULIA: That sounds like Christianity. Christians do their meek things and live off the fat of the land.

You are taking in this conversation and don't feel like adding to it.

BRIAN: But Christians aren't all in power.

JULIA: That's true.

BRIAN: I'm not saying I'm a Christian, but I guess I'm saying that the reason why I'm not a Christian is more that I just can't be sure that the Bible is

true.

JULIA: Nothing in the Bible offends you?

BRIAN: I would expect a real God to have some features that could offend me or other people. I just don't know that the God of the Bible is the real God.

JULIA: You don't always seem to have the most empathy.

BRIAN: Why is empathy such a good thing?

JULIA: You'll never understand.

BRIAN: Is it something that's good in itself?

JULIA: You'll never understand.

BRIAN: Am I defective?

JULIA: I don't want to talk about it.

BRIAN: Okay.

There is silence, and then Julia gets off the freeway.

YOU: I've never read the Bible.

BRIAN: You didn't grow up religious?

YOU: No. My parents just wanted us to be good kids. And I've been a good kid all my life.

BRIAN: It was probably your genes. The kind of parents who want good kids tend to have good genes.

YOU: Absolutely. I can't take any credit for how I've turned out.

BRIAN: Do you want to read the Bible? I've been thinking about reading it all the way through and it would be easier if I had someone else to do it with.

YOU: I'm not super-interested, but I guess I'm a little interested.

BRIAN: Okay, maybe later if you're more interested. I remember one time when I was in college, I was playing one of Andrew's console games...

YOU: What was the name of the game?

BRIAN: I don't remember anymore, but it was one of those RPGs with a plot.

YOU: Okay, I played those when I was a kid. Like Final Fantasy?

BRIAN: Like Final Fantasy. Basically.

YOU: Okay, got it.

BRIAN: I was really into it for a while. Maybe I was halfway in, and there had already been one plot twist. Now, this game has a feature where two players can play at once. But only one of them really controls the game. And one of my other roommates wanted to play along with me, like to make it a social thing. And I said yes, because of course I said yes. And he played as the player who controlled the game. I only did things during fights, when I controlled the one player in the party that was assigned to my controller.

YOU: Was that a problem?

BRIAN: I didn't feel too bad, just went along with it. But then he stopped wanting to play the game. I would ask him if he wanted to play and he said, "not now", but then later he would and we would play. And the times we played were spaced further and further apart until he completely lost interest. And by then it was finals and I graduated and moved out, and I never finished the game.

YOU: So you don't want it to be like that with the Bible.

BRIAN: Yeah. If you get more interested later, and can put in the time, we can do that, but I don't want to be bound to someone who stops me from doing what I need to do.

YOU: You need to read the Bible?

BRIAN: Yeah. At some point.

YOU: How do you know that you need to do that?

BRIAN: I just know.

YOU: Huh. Usually I try to figure out why I have intuitions.

BRIAN: It's more important to obey your intuitions than to understand them. If you know you have to do something, you know it.

YOU: I guess that's how morality works.

BRIAN: Right, exactly.

YOU: Sometimes if you come up with an

explanation for something you feel, it doesn't seem valid anymore. But I don't find that that's the case with morality.

BRIAN: Morality is just something we evolved to have.

YOU: I know. We evolved it so that we can not die.

BRIAN: Why is dying bad?

YOU: If we didn't think it was bad, we wouldn't exist. Therefore it's bad.

BRIAN: That doesn't follow logically.

YOU: But it's an emotionally satisfying explanation because we're wired to survive.

BRIAN: Maybe I need to read the Bible because God wants me to think about it.

YOU: I guess the God explanation is as good as the "we survive because we do" one as far as grounding the validity of an intuition. But how do you know that God exists? Oh, right, I remember your explanation.

BRIAN: How does it go, in your memory?

YOU: God exists because there's no way external reality can mean anything to us otherwise?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: It's a really technical point. People don't believe technical things these days.

BRIAN: So you don't believe it?

YOU: I don't think that means its invalid, but it's just not what my brain was evolved to believe. Or something like that.

BRIAN: Evolution can explain anything.

YOU: Pretty much. If it's adaptive, it's natural selection, and if it's not, natural selection hasn't caught up with it.

BRIAN: Pretty good idea, there.

YOU: Amazing idea.

JULIA: Okay, philosophers. Here we are at Brian's place.

Brian gets out and says goodbye and goes inside.

JULIA: Okay, Beth, time to go to your place.

You're quiet along the way to your apartment. Julia lets you off and you wave goodbye and go inside.

You are pretty tired yourself and go to bed as directly as you can, doing what you need to do along the way.

As you sleep, you have a dream.

You are in a forest, walking along a path, when Julia appears. She's looking for Brian.

YOU: What happened to Brian?

JULIA: Brian is dead.

Next you and Julia are sitting in Julia's car and Brian appears.

BRIAN: You exist.

JULIA: You exist, too.

BRIAN: I see you.

JULIA: I see you too. I need to look at the road.

Brian reaches his hand out and puts it on her shoulder.

JULIA: We'll talk about this later.

You wake up, figuring out that Brian is not dead and has not touched Julia's shoulder in the process.

And then you go through your waking-up routine and mostly forget the dream. You entirely forget the dream, because it has nothing to do with your waking life.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 15 "catholic tastes"
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COMMENTS

1. The owners of the appetizer bar are doing a little on their own, but they represent a reality that's much bigger than them.

2. This is not about Catholicism or high church Christianity in particular, but it is about Christianity.

3. I'm sure a trait could be found in some animal that counted against the truth of evolution (something natural selection should have removed by now), but otherwise, evolution is a powerful and general way to explain things.

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